

National-level activities for improving quality of health services

Introduction



Before starting this section, consider reviewing the introductory section. This section should also be read in conjunction with the district- and facility-level sections.

To improve health outcomes, health service delivery must be improved at the point of care. National-level leadership, ownership and action are required to guide, support and sustain such improvements (Box 5). This section describes activities required by national health leadership (also referred to as national stakeholders) in order to support quality improvement efforts across the system.

A clearly articulated national strategic direction on quality health services, as described in the WHO *Handbook for national quality policy and strategy* (8), is central to national efforts. The focus is to promote leadership and ownership of quality by national health authorities, ensuring integration with broader national health planning and with disease- or population-specific programmes. Particular attention is placed on eight core and inter-dependent elements to set national quality direction (Fig. 3) (6). Emphasis is also placed on ongoing refinements to national strategic direction on quality, based on feedback and implementation experience from other levels of the system.

Box 5.

Who is taking action at the national level?

The precise roles and/or actors responsible for each activity varies in accordance with country context. In general, those involved will include the ministry of health team responsible for coordinating national quality improvement and patient safety efforts, senior health system and political leaders, relevant steering committees or technical working groups, and other key quality-related bodies active at the country level (e.g. professional councils, disease or population-focused quality programmes, national health insurance funds or external evaluation bodies).

In many settings, national work on quality will also be supported by a range of international partner organizations (e.g. technical and donor agencies). While this document does not specifically address the roles of all such organizations, it is nonetheless important that national authorities consider how such partners can add value, and that any international partners focus resources on alignment with the national efforts to avoid fragmentation and/or verticalization.

Figure 3 Eight inter-dependent elements of the national quality policy and strategy approach



While this planning guide presents activities required at different levels to improve quality of health services, health outcomes can be maximized through strong collaboration across all levels of the health system. In this way, activities at each level can combine to promote institutionalization of a culture of quality. It is also recommended that stakeholders at each level understand the activities taking place in other parts of the system, so those at the national level are encouraged to read the other sections of this guide to help develop a fuller picture of how the system can work together to promote quality at the point of care.

The focus of this section

The purpose of this section is for national level stakeholders – in particular those with responsibility for developing and implementing national quality programmes – to understand both the key activities required at the national level and how they can support delivery of quality health services across all levels of health system. Although strategic planning is critical, planning alone is not sufficient. Instead of aiming for a perfect plan, countries can initiate improvement activities alongside the planning process, learn from the implementation experience, and incorporate lessons to update and strengthen their strategic approach accordingly. Whatever levels of human and financial resources are available, there is always an opportunity to start. The activities described here represent important starting points to promote system-wide action on quality.

NATIONAL START-UP ACTIVITIES



This section describes initial activities to improve quality of health services. Stakeholders at the national level are responsible for a range of activities focused on establishing commitment, developing national strategic direction, and developing an operational plan and resourcing strategy.

1

ESTABLISH NATIONAL COMMITMENT TO IMPROVE QUALITY

A critical early step is for national level leadership to commit to improve quality of health services, for example through high-level official political or policy statements.



Key activities

- Senior health leadership and national government commits to improve quality of health services and allocate appropriate domestic resources.
- National government/ministry of health commits to develop national strategic direction on quality.
- National government/ministry of health commits to endorse and enact globally agreed resolutions, commitments and partnerships related to quality of care.
- Ministry of health commits to:
 - supporting development of leadership on quality health services across the system, and promoting a culture of quality;
 - provide regular public updates on progress in improving quality of health services;
 - meaningful and sustained engagement of patients, families, communities and health workers in design, planning, implementation and monitoring of national efforts;
 - respond to district needs in reaching selected quality goals and priorities;
 - facilitate sharing of learning (successes and failures) within and across countries;
 - coordinate and align development and technical partner activities with the national quality agenda.
- Other key national-level stakeholders supporting quality activities commit to align with national strategic direction on quality.
- Develop a communication and advocacy plan to support buy-in and engagement from stakeholders across the system.
- Consider development of an action plan (see Annex 4 for sample) outlining broad steps to be taken to further the national quality agenda, incorporating development and implementation of national quality policy and strategy (6).

2 DEVELOP NATIONAL STRATEGIC DIRECTION ON QUALITY

Country efforts to improve quality of health services should be based on a clear national strategic direction on quality, often articulated in a national quality policy and strategy (2). Countries that do not have national policies or strategies for quality health services should initiate multistakeholder efforts to develop these. The WHO *Handbook for national quality policy and strategy* (8) provides further guidance on this, based on eight interdependent elements for national strategic direction on quality (see Fig. 3).

Although developing national strategic direction on quality may take time, this should not delay the initiation of further quality activities across the system; in fact, such activities can help inform efforts to set national strategic direction on quality. While this process will be led by national-level stakeholders, development and implementation of national strategic direction on quality relies upon active engagement of stakeholders from across all levels of the health system. This will be a key activity for developing a shared understanding of quality across national, district and facility levels. The main overarching activity within this section is to strengthen or develop national strategic direction on quality. Key activities below are described under each of the eight elements of the national quality policy and strategy approach.

Many of the actions across the system will be based on a practical, prioritized set of quality interventions, agreed at the national level, and implemented in collaboration with districts and facilities. Implementation of most interventions will require action at multiple levels of the health

system; there is no simple delineation of national, district and facility interventions. This document uses the list of illustrative quality interventions outlined in the WHO *Handbook for national quality policy and strategy* (8) and the WHO–World Bank–OECD report ***Delivering quality health services*** (2).



For more information and description of a set of 23 illustrative quality interventions, see annex of the WHO–World Bank–OECD report *Delivering quality health services* (2)

Quality interventions can be broadly categorized as serving the following purposes:

- Creating a system environment that supports quality of health services (e.g. training, professional regulation, external evaluation, clinical governance, public reporting, benchmarking, ethical performance-based financing and medication regulation).
- Reducing harm (e.g. safety protocols and checklists, facility inspection, availability of personal protective equipment and adverse event reporting).
- Improving facility-level clinical care (e.g. clinical standards and protocols, clinical decision support tools, audit and feedback, morbidity and mortality reviews, and quality improvement cycles).
- Engaging and empowering patients, families and communities (e.g. health literacy, peer support, shared decision-making and self-management programmes).

The list is not exhaustive, and there may be other quality interventions that are being applied in various countries. However, none of these are simple to implement, and they should not be viewed in isolation – these interventions are interrelated and can have greater impact when implemented in combination. In general, the national level will have a key role in considering the set of interventions to be applied across the system, while district and facility leaders will determine how best this same set of interventions can be adopted and adapted at their respective levels. The national level will also often have a specific role in implementing many of the system environment interventions. It is important to note that many districts and facilities will commence QI activities before there is a validated national strategic direction. Where this occurs, efforts should be made to encourage learning from implementation experience that can be fed into the process of setting national strategic direction and finalizing the set of interventions.

Underpinning the national strategic direction on quality is quality measurement (10), which should be given particular attention as any national quality programme is implemented. Effective measurement supports quality improvement efforts across the system, including:

- monitoring for adherence against standards and guidelines;
- feedback to providers on quality improvement activities;
- transparency and accountability to the public;
- benchmarking to understand comparative performance;
- strategic or value-based purchasing and contracting;
- monitoring the effectiveness of quality interventions.

For tools and resources on quality measurement, visit National quality policy and strategy tools and resources compendium (page 15) (10)



Key activities

These activities are based on the eight inter-related elements (see Fig. 3). It is recommended that the elements are reviewed carefully for full detail of the suggested actions.

National health goals and priorities

- Identify existing health sector goals and priorities, as well as existing relevant health planning processes.
- Throughout the national quality policy and strategy development process, aim for alignment of emerging activities and governance arrangements with existing national health goals and priorities.
- Develop a statement of goals and priorities for the national quality policy and strategy, based on national health goals and priorities.

For more information on all eight elements of developing national strategic direction on quality see the WHO Handbook for national quality policy and strategy (8)



Local definition of quality

- Identify previously developed or published national definitions of quality.
- Systematically engage a broad range of health system stakeholders in the development of the national strategic direction on quality. This is likely to include relevant departments across the ministry of health, health workers and managers from all levels of the health system, community and civil society representation, health professional bodies and councils, and cooperating partners such as health insurance and external evaluation organizations.
- Develop a shared understanding among stakeholders of quality, usually articulated in an agreed national definition.

Stakeholder mapping and engagement

- Identify and engage stakeholders responsible for existing quality-related programmes, for example disease/population programmes or prominent facility QI programmes.
- Engage key subnational/district stakeholders and those directly affected by quality of care issues in further planning for implementation of national strategic direction on quality.

Situational analysis

- Collect relevant data from multiple sources on state of quality, contextual factors and the historical quality development journey.
- Review relevant national health and quality documentation (e.g. existing quality policy/strategy, national health strategic plans).
- Map existing quality-related interventions taking place throughout the health system.

- Through review of existent data and engagement of stakeholders and communities, develop a situational analysis that outlines the current state of quality, identifies challenges and assets for improving quality, and can inform development of appropriate interventions.

Governance and organizational structure

- Clarify the function and governance of existing structures for quality health services, aiming to place them at an appropriate level within the ministry of health, to ensure coordination and provide technical leadership. These structures should also formalise collaboration and coordination between different health system levels.
- Strengthen or establish a government-led, multistakeholder steering group/technical working group to guide and coordinate efforts (11). Consideration should be given to how such a group can frame accountability for quality health services as a responsibility not just of a quality team or directorate, but of all relevant parts of the government (e.g. health workforce, medicines, policy and planning etc.).
- Consider options for strengthening accountability for delivery of quality health services, encompassing all health system levels and both the public and private sectors.
- Consider options for integration of existing quality programmes throughout national quality planning process (8).
- Align national strategic direction for quality with broader health planning and budgeting processes, ensuring there are budget lines for key quality activities.

Improvement methods and interventions

- Collect and review local evidence for successes and challenges in implementing quality interventions. This should provide an opportunity for technical partners, district stakeholders and facility health workers to shape a set of interventions based on the local implementation experience.
- Select and prioritize an initial set of proposed interventions, taking into account:
 - existing infrastructure and available resources for quality;
 - national quality goals and priorities;
 - local and global evidence/consensus on quality interventions;



For more information on IPC, see: [Interim practical manual supporting national implementation of the WHO Guidelines on core components of infection prevention and control programmes \(9\)](#).



For more information on WASH, see: [Water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities: Practical steps to achieve universal access to quality care \(12\)](#).

- global consensus on action areas, for example the global patient safety action plan;
 - need for action at different levels of the health system;
 - health worker and service user views on what is required to ensure quality care;
 - need for action across quality planning, control/assurance and improvement;
 - foundational requirements to support quality improvement (see Fig. 1);
 - need for essential infrastructure, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (12) and infection, prevention and control (IPC) (9);
 - agreed selection criteria such as feasibility, value for money, and estimated impact on national health goals.
- Develop plan for supporting learning and knowledge management across the health system. Initial steps might include engagement of local academic institutions, identification and training of learning focal points in districts and facilities, and collaboration with partners on learning events.

Health management information systems and data systems

- Map existing data sources and capabilities.
- Identify gaps related to quality in current health information systems.
- Develop a plan to improve systems required for measuring, monitoring and reporting on quality of health services at the national level (8,10).

For more information on learning systems, see: WHO Global Learning Laboratory for Quality UHC (13).



Quality indicators and core measures

- Develop a pragmatic national quality measurement framework. This should facilitate measurement of quality care across the system as well monitoring and evaluation to understand and improve implementation of the set of quality interventions:
 - Map quality-related indicators that are currently collected, as well as current data collection platforms (e.g. district health information systems, surveys).
 - In collaboration with stakeholders, develop a framework for quality measurement that reflects local definitions and national priorities.
 - Allocate existing quality indicators against this quality measurement framework and identify any key gaps where no data are currently collected.
 - If necessary, suggest new indicators to meet the identified key gaps, utilizing existing data collection platforms where possible and drawing on global lists of illustrative quality indicators.
 - From the framework for quality measurement, select a small number of indicators (i.e. 5–10) that should be prioritized for early use in monitoring and improvement. Outline what mechanisms will be used to monitor and use these indicators for improvement across the health system.
 - Develop an action plan (see Annex 4 for example), outlining the steps that need to be taken to move from measuring and using the initial set of indicators (5–10) to measuring and using the full framework.



DEVELOP AN OPERATIONAL PLAN AND RESOURCING STRATEGY

To ensure that the national strategic direction on quality is translated into actions that improve care, the national level has a key role in operational planning. A national operational plan describes what is needed to achieve progress towards the stated goals and priorities of the policy/strategy, including resources, timeline, and arrangements for monitoring. An operational plan will usually outline how the strategy will be implemented, specifying the tasks that will be required, who will complete them, the intended timescale, resource requirements, and how success will be measured. It may focus on a shorter timescale than the policy or strategy, being revisited and revised throughout the full term of the strategy. The strategy might also be supplemented by a more detailed resourcing plan specifying the financial and human resources required across the system for implementing the quality interventions, identifying current funding sources, and outlining how any further required resources can be mobilized.

Operational planning needs to consider resourcing requirements. While quality improvement efforts across a health system can be expected to result in more cost-effective care and less waste of resources, there will clearly be initial resource implications as activities are commenced. Teams responsible for the national strategic direction on quality should plan for how the strategic approach, governance structures and interventions can be adequately resourced.



Key activities

- Agree on process for developing an operational plan. This may be a discrete planning process for the national initiative on quality or there may be an opportunity to combine with broader national health planning or existing financial planning cycles. Those developing operational plans should consider:



For more information and tools on operational planning, visit: [National quality policy and strategy tools and resources compendium \(page 17\) \(10\)](#).

- where to begin (for example, whether to start in particular districts or with a nationwide programme);
 - the need for operational planning at different levels of the health system, including resource considerations to support subnational scale up of quality interventions;
 - timing and plan for nationwide spread and scale up;
 - how to involve key stakeholders in operational planning.
- Develop draft operational plan and share with key stakeholders for consultation.
 - Prioritize quality interventions, giving due consideration to additional cost, expected impact, feasibility and importance in reaching the aims identified. In the start-up phase, consider a focus on 'best buys' or 'quick wins' to accelerate initial progress on quality, focusing on those interventions that will give maximum impact for limited additional cost.
 - Engage with ministry of finance, donor organizations, technical partners and related technical programmes to understand resources required for each quality intervention, and clarify how this need will be met, also ensuring existing structures and systems are built upon where possible.
 - Finalize operational and resourcing plan and agree process for progress review as part of broader health system arrangements for quality health services.
 - Identify priority resourcing gaps. Carefully consider the benefits and risks associated with roll-out of some activities in only selected geographical areas.
 - Where required, develop a formal plan to mobilize funds to address critical gaps and allow for future scale up.

NATIONAL ONGOING ACTIVITIES



While the activities described earlier will need early attention by national teams, several further activities will require ongoing attention to promote the sustainability of efforts. As well as ongoing advocacy and coordination of national programmes, the national level should help address health systems constraints on delivery of quality health services that are not easy to resolve at a facility or district level. For example, strengthening or adapting human resources, commodities, infrastructure and financing.^a

Key activities

- Assess and maintain existing infrastructure and systems, ensuring adequate resources, oversight and integration with related national efforts for quality health services.
- On an ongoing basis, sensitize political and health system leadership regarding national progress.
- Continue to refine mechanisms to use data on quality emerging from the health information system and take action to improve, identifying where national level intervention brings added value to quality improvement efforts.
- Respond in a timely manner to district needs in reaching selected improvement aims.
- Share and facilitate learning between districts.
- Support ongoing needs across all health system levels for leadership development.
- Develop and maintain mechanisms to facilitate effective coordination between different stakeholders, including technical and development partners.
- Drive the regular, multistakeholder review of quality work across all levels to improve and refine operational planning. This process should bring together learning from national and subnational levels (for example on implementation of the prioritized set of quality interventions), and can be used to reappraise available resources, evaluate emerging implementation experience, and plan for scale up of the strategic approach. For example, where this has been initially implemented through a specific technical programme or in a particular geographical area.
- Demonstrate accountability using existing periodic review mechanisms.
- Publicly report progress on implementation (including data on the state of quality).
- Continue to engage communities, civil society, health providers and health workers in ongoing strategic planning.
- Identify steps to sustain progress and institutionalise a culture of quality, for example:
 - Review of factors promoting a culture of quality (8).
 - Development of ministry of health/health services values statement and/or patient charter.
 - Commitment to publicly release data on progress on quality of care.
 - Leadership engagement and development activities to develop appropriate leadership culture across the health system.
 - Engagement with regulatory and professional bodies.
- Engagement with global learning mechanisms/networks (13–15) and connection with counterparts in peer countries to share progress and learning.

^a A range of WHO normative materials are available to support this broader health systems strengthening, and selected examples are listed in Annex 3.

Driving foundational requirements for quality from the national level

Quality at the point of care relies upon several actions at the national level. Table 1 outlines key considerations for national level stakeholders as they look to develop and sustain foundational requirements for quality.

Table 1. Key considerations for national level stakeholders

FOUNDATIONAL REQUIREMENT	NATIONAL-LEVEL KEY CONSIDERATIONS (NON-EXHAUSTIVE)
Onsite support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can national quality teams strengthen on-site support mechanisms through national planning? How can health care and health management training be improved to increase capacity across the system in quality improvement? What human and financial resources are required to enable effective on-site support and how should initial efforts be prioritized?
Measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What sources of data on quality of health services exist (e.g. disease/population programmes, health facility assessment, patient surveys etc.)? How can the national team responsible for quality access the measurement expertise needed to generate the required data? How can measurement capacity and information systems be strengthened across the health system? How can transparency of data on health system performance be achieved/enhanced? How will the efficiency and effectiveness of quality interventions be evaluated?
Sharing and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What support can the national level provide to initiate and sustain a learning system? How can the emerging learning be meaningfully fed into national strategic direction-setting for quality? How can the national level facilitate sharing of learning between districts? How can health system leaders engage in global learning on quality?
Stakeholder and community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What role can national quality teams play in designing and applying a community engagement approach to ensure that care provided in facilities meets the needs and preferences of patients, families and community members, and is to their satisfaction? (16) Who needs to be engaged to ensure national plans are in line with needs of stakeholders and specific population groups, to address determinants within and beyond the health sector? How can these approaches be used to ensure meaningful engagement and empowerment of communities in broader national dialogue on health system planning? How can the activities of partners be best coordinated and aligned to maximize impact on quality?
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What additional management capacity and training is required at all levels to support quality improvement efforts, and how can this be achieved? What upstream planning is required at the national level to enhance management of quality programmes and support at the district and facility level? What practical steps can be taken to promote a culture of quality throughout the system?

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS

NATIONAL LEVEL

Improving quality of health services requires several actions at the national level. After reading this chapter you should know how to address the following interconnected actions



Establish national commitment to improve quality



Develop national strategic direction on quality



Select and prioritize a set of quality interventions



Develop a pragmatic quality measurement framework



Develop operational and resourcing plan with key stakeholders

